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RS, NI, IN
SUBJECT: DELHI DIARY, OCT 5-12

Classified By: PolCouns Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (U) Below is a compilation of political highlights from Embassy New Delhi for October 5-12, 2007 that did not feature in our other reporting, including:

- FM Mukherjee Visiting Moscow
- India Put the Brakes on Rail Service to Dhaka
- Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Trip to Africa
- Singapore's Air Force to Train in West Bengal
- First India-China Joint Army Exercises Delayed
- Gujjars Call Off Protest Movement for Now
- Mayawati Continues to Pull in the Crowds

FM Mukherjee Visiting Moscow

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee is in Moscow October 11-13 to attend the 13th annual India-Russia Inter Governmental Commission (IRIGC). This is the third high-level India visitor to Russia in the past three months, after National Security Advisor Narayanan's August visit and Army Chief JJ Singh's September visit. Mukherjee will be followed by Defense Minister A.K. Antony October 22, and Prime Minister Singh, who will visit Moscow sometime in December. Indo-Russian affairs analyst Dr. Gulshan Sachdeva enjoined PolOff October 11 not to read too much into the flurry of high-level visits from India, noting that there have been hundreds of such visits between the two countries since 1991, with little effect.

¶3. (U) Representatives from the India Ministries of Finance, Petroleum and Gas, Steel, Science and Technology will accompany Mukherjee on this visit, attending their respective working group meetings under the IRIGC umbrella.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: We predict a laundry list of impressive-sounding "agreements" will be proclaimed simultaneously by the Foreign Ministries of both India and Russia in the wake of Mukherjee's visit, as happened after Putin's last visit to India (ref NEW DELHI 440), but our

contacts and recent experience tell us this will be mostly hot air and little substance. We may find out some new details on India's investments in the Sakhalin oil fields.
END COMMENT.

India Put the Brakes on Rail Service to Dhaka

15. (C) Indian press reported that the GOI has adopted a "go slow" approach to the opening of a passenger rail service between Kolkata's Sealdah Railway Station and Joydevpur in Dhaka. The "Indian Express" noted that Railway and External Affairs ministries met with their Bangladeshi counterparts in Delhi on October 8, but refused to discuss the inauguration of the passenger train. The article quoted a Railway Ministry official as stating that, "Running a train on the route is not an issue here. However, a political decision is yet to be taken." Citing unnamed sources, the newspaper reported that the UPA government has ordered the Railway Ministry to refrain from discussing passenger service modalities with the Government of Bangladesh, as it remains concerned about "the rising rate of infiltration from Bangladesh and the political situation there." The article related that fencing issues and Customs and Immigration facilities remain logistical stumbling blocks. Ministry of External Affairs Joint Secretary (Bangladesh) Mohan Kumar noted the same obstacles during his farewell meeting with PolCouns in September but forecast that the service would commence later that month.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Trip to Africa

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16. (SBU) The October 10 issue of "The Hindu" reported that Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will attend the second annual IBSA Summit (India-Brazil-South Africa) hosted by South African President Mbeki on 17 October. The Ministry of External Affairs Latin America desk confirms that coordination on UN reform and the Doha Round will figure high on the agenda as well as connectivity between the three nations. Prime Minister Singh will also visit Nigeria, India's largest trading partner in Africa, on 14-16 October. Singh's Nigeria visit will focus on investment opportunities in the oil refinery, steel, and telecom sectors. Singh is the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Nigeria since Jawaharlal Nehru in 1962.

India to Allow Singapore's Air Force to Train in West Bengal

17. (C) Indian media covered the 9 October signing of a five-year defense deal between India and Singapore allowing the Republic of Singapore Air Force (RSAF) to use the Kalaikunda airbase in West Bengal for flight training. Although the airbase has been used extensively in India-Singapore joint exercises, this is the first long-term arrangement between the two air forces. Embassy contacts report that the deal will allow Singapore, plagued by lack of airspace, to exercise up to its full potential. India will benefit from getting to train with the RSAF's F-16 Fighting Falcon, the same aircraft used by the Pakistani air force. The Indian Express reported that the agreement, which includes cash payments and possible facility upgrades, is the start of a comprehensive defense cooperation program between the two countries that will cover all three branches of the armed services.

First India-China Joint Army Exercises Delayed

18. (SBU) China postponed the first ever India-China army exercise to be held in November, according to media sources. Former Chairman of the Chief of Staff Committee (COSC) General J.J. Singh's May 2007 China visit had paved the way

for the anti-terror exercise, with both sides announcing in August that the drill would take place in Chengdu. Embassy sources noted at that time that the exercise would involve approximately sixty troops from each side and last for two weeks. However, the October 9 issue of the "Indian Express" cited sources as stating that China cancelled an Indian planning team's visit to China to finalize the details regarding the exercise. The article quoted an Indian official as stating that, "We were surprised when they pulled out at the last moment," and asserted that China called for the date and venue to be discussed further at the Annual Defense Dialogue (ADD) between the two countries. The ADD is scheduled to meet in China later this month. Media sources report that India's request that the joint exercise be de-linked from the ADD was rejected by China.

Gujjars Call Off Protest Movement for Now

¶9. (U) After nine days of protests, Gujjar leaders demanding scheduled caste status for their people called off their agitation movement on October 10 and agreed to set up a joint committee with the Rajasthan government to discuss their demands. Protests had grown more destructive over the weekend despite the Rajasthan government's arrest on October 2 of thousands of Gujjars, who blocked rail service along the busy Delhi-Mumbai spur by removing a 250-meter section of the track and held up a cargo train in separate parts of Rajasthan, according to press sources. The Bharatiya Janata Party-led state government was forced to bring in Gujjar leader Kirori Singh Bainsla * who was arrested on October 2 * to resolve the issue, allowing authorities to rebuild the tracks after 21 hours. On October 10, however, Bainsla

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announced an end to the protest movement, following the decision by Gujjar leaders and the Rajasthan government to hold joint meetings to address the main Gujjar demands - including Jaipur's support in lobbying New Delhi to classify the Gujjars as tribals, the withdrawal of criminal cases against Gujjars, and compensation to the families of Gujjars killed during the protest movement. Over 60,000 Gujjars that had been held in jail for protesting were set to be released, according to press reports.

¶10. (C) Comment: The Rajasthan government appears to have bought itself breathing space in dealing with this ethnic problem, but until the central issue of the Gujjars' desire for tribal status is resolved the issue has the potential to escalate again. As India and the various political parties seem to be preparing for the prospect of Lok Sabha elections in 2008, and given the BJP's relative weakness nationally, the Gujjar issue could become a political football between the local, more emboldened Congress Party - whose MPs have joined the protests and probably would like to see the issue continue to embarrass the state government - and the BJP, which will be keen to negotiate a lasting resolution and thereby bolster its electoral standing in the state.

Mayawati Continues to Pull in the Crowds

¶11. (U) On October 9, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) President Mayawati launched into campaign mode with an eye on the national stage with a huge party rally in Lucknow. At the rally - which many observers estimate drew a crowd of up to 1.5 million people - Mayawati warned the crowd about the dangers of &money, mafia, media, and middlemen and rebuffed various allegations of corruption against her as false propaganda by political rivals unnerved by her party's growing popularity and influence. She reserved much of the speech for national issues, including a prediction that the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government would not be able to find a political consensus on the civilian nuclear agreement with the United States. She implored her supporters to prepare

for early Lok Sabha elections, which many expect sometime in 2008.

¶12. (C) Comment: There is little doubt that Mayawati * whose sole guiding ideology seems to be increasing her political power and base under the guise of populist, pro-Dalit rhetoric * is a growing political force that cannot be ignored. Even though she has been Chief Minister for less than six months, she already has her sights on the national stage. State elections in Gujarat later this year * where she reportedly has put much effort into bolstering the BSP,s standing * will be a good barometer of just how national a figure she has become. End Comment.
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